Plug In, Log On, Tune In

Internet Talk Radio

BY KEVIN M. SAVETZ

From the depths of cyberspace, a new medium has emerged. "Internet Talk Radio" is a new information service that blurs the line between the online world and traditional media.

Internet Talk Radio (ITR) distributes weekly "radio shows" via the Internet's anonymous FTP service. Each show—a half hour or an hour long—can be downloaded to a workstation or home computer and played using audio playback software. Unlike a myriad of other Internet newsletters and journals, Internet Talk Radio is the only one that actually speaks.

Each show is composed of several ".au" format sounds which can be played on a Sun or NeXT workstation, among other machines. Personal computer users can also listen in, but (depending on the computer) you may need to convert the ".au" sounds into a format more familiar to your hardware.

All this talk comes at a price, however. A typical hour-long radio show consumes a whopping 20MB of disk space. Despite its slow sampling rate of 8kHz, ITR is a memory hog.

Carl Malamud, founder of ITR, explains: "The idea for ITR came from my frustration with the trade press. I knew they weren't providing the information I wanted, and was looking for an alternative." He notes that the trade press focuses on marketing and reviews, leaving a gap for a general interest, technically oriented publication for Internet users. "I couldn't start a magazine, because it takes money to print and distribute a magazine," he says, so he turned to the Internet as a general-purpose distribution method.

"I looked at the trends in multimedia support on the Internet, at the number of users with more and more bandwidth and bigger disk drives, and decided to give 'radio' a try," he said.

Some net users have criticized the talk radio concept as a grandiose waste of network bandwidth, given the fact that the same information in text format could fit into only a few kilobytes. "The reason you get audio information from a $3000 (or $30,000) computer," Malamud said, "is because ultimately this gives you a very new medium. We're not trying to replace radio, just as the trucks didn't replace the railroads and the telephone didn't replace the telegraph. There are things we can do that you can't do on a radio, like go interactive, or add WAIS databases to support a program, or use general-purpose languages like PERL to make an audio-on-demand server..." It is the versatility of ITR that is its selling point.

ITR's parent company, Internet Multicasting Service, isn't doing this just for glory. Each program carries sponsors, and a minute of each program is given to acknowledge the supporting vendors. The blurbs aren't quite commercials—they resemble public TV's post-show sponsor messages ("Brought to you by a grant from Frobnitz Corp., and viewers like you!"). Current sponsors include Sun Microsystems and O'Reilly & Associates book publisher.

WHAT'S ON...

For the most part, ITR consists of interviews. Whether they're talking with the "Geek of the Week" (a featured member of the technical community) or focusing on "the new American reality" in the *Tech Nation* show, it all boils down to people conversing with each other. Like the name says, Internet Talk Radio parallels its mainstream counterpart. Except ITR is a lot more nerdy.

Tech Nation is a weekly radio show that focuses on "the new American reality"—that the US has become the "tech" nation. The premise is that this new reality is causing introspection—"Americans are looking at who they are and where they are going."

Tech Nation is hosted by Dr. Moira Gunn, a former NASA scientist and robotics engineer, who focuses on uncovering core issues as well as important technology announcements. Unlike *Geek of the Week*, which is only distributed via the Internet,

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ITR founder Carl Malamud:

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Tech Nation is broadcast over the Public Radio Satellite System, which makes the show available to nearly six hundred radio stations in the United States. The show has been produced in the studios of KQED in San Francisco since 1987, and became part of ITR's schedule in March of this year.

Interview subjects on *Tech Nation* have included Dr. Linus Pauling, two-time Nobel Prize Winner; Jane Metcalfe and Louis Rossetto, editors/publishers of *Wired* magazine; and Bill Koch on winning the America's Cup. Occasionally the program seems narcissistic, as when Gunn interviewed Carl Malamud, the creator of Internet Talk Radio.

Geek of the Week is a weekly interview with prominent members of the technical community. The show focuses on "sophisticated discussions of issues facing the Internet, networking, and computing." Malamud calls it "the intelligent alternative to today's trade press."

In April, Malamud introduced a cousin to ITR, called Internet Town Hall, which includes audio recordings of speeches. In the first week they released speeches by the Dalai Lama, Bob Dole, and Hershel Shanks on the Dead Sea Scrolls; also the hearings by Congressman Markey on encryption and privacy.

Internet Town Hall programs are good to pick and choose from. Unlike ITR, Town Hall doesn't necessarily focus on computers and technology. One program consisted of Secretary Bruce Babbit presenting Clinton's environmental program to the National Press Club. This sort of archival sound information could prove useful for those of us who don't want to watch C-SPAN all day. If you find you need information from a speech given last month, Town Hall might be the forum to find it.

The programs sound good, considering the medium is in its infancy. After a snazzy musical introduction, Malamud announces (in his best DJ voice), "This is Internet Talk Radio, flame of the Internet."

Sound quality isn't great. Most of one program I heard suffered from speakerphone syndrome: it sounded like the voices were coming from the middle of an empty room. Malamud says the sound quality is improving "as we learn how to use our equipment and adapt it to the realities of this rather strange publishing platform."

Sound quality aside, it's interesting to be able to hear the voices behind the technology. One interview featured Brewster Kahle, the father of WAIS, Inc. and the Wide Area Information Server. Conversation flows neatly from one topic to the next. The interview breaks for an offbeat selection such as *The Incidental Tourist* (restaurant reviews, one of which featured ways to achieve gastronomic heights in the basements of Asian department stores), a book review, or *Name That Acronym*, delivering an "arcane acronym to reverse engineer."

Sun workstation listeners only need the system's "audiotool" program to listen in. Listening on a PC requires SoundBlaster or some other audio source, plus a program that plays ".au" files or converts them to ".wav" files. Macintosh users need a program to convert ".au" to "audio IFF" format. Everyone needs enough disk space and memory to hold 5MB chunks of the program. (Information on finding the free conversion utilities is available from "info@radio.com".)

As compression technology advances, ITR (and its eventual copycats) will be able to stuff longer programs into less space. This may be essential to the proliferation of the medium. At about half a minute of sound per megabyte, ITR doesn't have time to waste.

FOR MORE INFORMATION...

For more information, send electronic mail to "info@radio.com". You'll automatically receive the basic ITR information. For an updated list of sites that carry ITR, send email to "sites@radio.com".

The latest information, including program schedules, is available on the Usenet group "alt.internet.talk-radio". ■

WHERE TO FIND INTERNET TALK RADIO

Internet talk radio files are available from a variety of anonymous FTP sites worldwide. You should be able to find them at the following sites, but check the updated list to find your closest site.

Northern Arizona University, Flagstaff, AZ:
ftp.nau.edu (134.114.64.70) in directory "/talk-radio".

Oregon Graduate Institute, Beaverton, OR:
cse.ogi.edu (129.95.20.2, 129.95.40.2, or 129.95.46.2) in directory "pub/talk-radio".

University of Oregon, Eugene, OR:
ftp.uoregon.edu (128.223.32.35) in directory "/pub/internet-talk-radio".

ITR is also available via the World Wide Web in"http://www.ncsa.uiuc.edu/radio/radio.html".